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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses classroom teachers' influence on children's literary learning in families. The challenge of working with families has sometimes been ignored in the past, leading in effect to parental exclusion. An alternative approach can be based on some key ideas. A broad concept of family literacy and an expanded concept of literacy teaching which recognizes a spectrum from "instruction" (characteristic of schools) to "facilitation" (characteristic of families) may be emphasized. A distinction could be made between children's home literacy learning and their classroom learning, with focus on the former in work with families. The "ORIM" conceptual framework used in the Sheffield Raising Early Achievement in Literacy Project in England can provide recognition of families' contribution to children's literacy development and the ways in which early childhood educators can work with families. "ORIM" stands for "Opportunities," "Recognition," "Interaction" and "Model"--four things which families can provide for children's literacy development. It is suggested that schools identify which "circle of involvement" they are currently working in and which they aspire to. (Includes eight figures; contains six references.) (Author/NKA)

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FAMILY LITERACY
IN A BALANCED EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAM

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ABSTRACT

Children's literacy learning in families is crucial but how can classroom teachers influence it? This presentation is about rethinking work with families. The challenge of working with families has sometimes been ignored in the past, leading in effect to parental exclusion. An alternative approach can be based on some key ideas. We should insist on a broad concept of family literacy and an expanded concept of literacy teaching which recognises a spectrum from 'instruction' (characteristic of schools) to 'facilitation' (characteristic of families). We should distinguish children's home literacy learning from their classroom learning and focus on the former in work with families. The 'ORIM' conceptual framework used in the Sheffield Raising Early Achievement in Literacy Project in England can help recognition of families' contribution to children's literacy development and ways in which early childhood educators can work with families. Practical approaches are illustrated. It is suggested that schools should identify which 'circle of involvement' they are currently working in and which they aspire to.

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INTRODUCTION

Early literacy educators in many countries are now facing a some difficult challenges. They derive from instability and change in school structures and funding, ever increasing pressure to raise literacy standards, top-down curriculum change, the impact of information and communications technology, and persistent inequalities in children's access to the curriculum and achievement associated with poverty, class, race and gender.

* * * Figure 1 here * * *

I want to add another to this list of challenges - *the challenge of working with families*. It is a difficult one, especially when all the others have to be dealt with too. Here is what I think it consists of.

Much, if not most, of young children's literacy learning takes place outside the classroom - in families, homes, neighbourhoods. We know this from research evidence which shows the influence of pre-school factors on children's literacy development at school entry and their subsequent literacy achievement. And of course there is a mountain of evidence about the continuing effect of home and other out-of-school factors throughout children's school careers. I do not think this point is controversial. Some educators are keen to argue that schools can make a difference. Of course they can. But surely it is beyond dispute that pre-school and out-of-school factors are hugely important.

* * * Figure 2 here * * *

Here is the challenge to early literacy educators.

Pre-school and out-of-school factors are beyond the teacher's direct control. If I may be permitted to quote from a chapter I have contributed to a forthcoming IRA book,

> "There is a limit to what can be achieved in the classroom alone but, given that teachers cannot simply hand over all their responsibilities to parents, what are they to do?" (Hannon, 1998)

* * * Figure 3 here * * *

In the past one response to this challenge was to ignore it. 'Parental exclusion' or severely limited involvement was not always deliberate; it could consist of the practices listed in Figure 3.

This is no longer acceptable. We know too much about the power of out-of-school learning not to try to harness it, especially for children likely to under-achieve at school. Research shows that early education programmes involving parents are more effective than those that do not. Parents generally want to be involved (that, after all, is the reason most of them have children in the first place). Also, parents have increasing importance in legal and policy terms. Involvement is therefore the way forward.

In terms of the themes of this institute, we need to find ways of working with families which strike a *balance* between school and family learning (recognising the distinctiveness of each), which maximise *continuity* from family to school - building on the former not 'overwriting' it, and which result in children *achieving* more (and parents too in some situations).

SOME KEY IDEAS

There are some key ideas and concepts which can underpin practice in this area.

* * * Figure 4 here * * *

First, we should hold to a broad meaning of 'family literacy' programs. This is a contested term but it is too useful to be restricted only to programs which require parents to undertake adult education if their children are to participate. Parents can be involved without themselves being students.

* * * Figure 5 here * * *

Second, we need an expanded concept of literacy learning and teaching. Figure 5 reminds us that not everything which is learnt needs to be taught. Even when there is teaching, it need not be formal instruction of the kind which - necessarily - predominates in school. Teaching can be construed in terms of a spectrum with 'instruction' at one end and what might be termed 'facilitation' at the other end. Both have their place and adults who help children to become literate can, and do, employ both. In school, however, the focus is on instruction (usually with one adult to many learners) whereas at home facilitation has much greater potential. In thinking of family literacy programs we should think twice before casting parents into the role of instructors when they may achieve more as facilitators. This has practical consequences in terms, for example, of the kinds of activities which literacy educators might encourage parents to undertake at home with children.

Third, what is to be the preferred focus of work with families - children's school learning or their home learning? Both are possible, desirable, and have been the subject of good practice. It should be clear, however, from what I have said so far that for me the important challenge is to try to influence children's home learning. This means recognising differences in the two kinds of learning. Home learning, for example is distinguished by its flexible timing, spontaneity, high adult:child ratio, and integration into everyday tasks and activities. Classroom learning is more directed, informed by curricular objectives, timetabled and dependent on more contrived activities. One is not necessarily superior to the other but they are certainly different (see Hannon, 1995, for a fuller analysis). We should not only think about how to get parents to support what children do

in class but also how to support parents in facilitating children's learning from family literacy activities at home.

Finally, it helps to have some framework for understanding the nature of families' facilitation of children's literacy learning. In recent work in Sheffield with my colleague Cathy Nutbrown we have used what we refer to the ORIM framework (Hannon, 1995; Nutbrown & Hannon, 1997). I offer it here as one possible aid to the development of practice.

To explain how we think ORIM can help in the development of practice, we have produced a 20-minute video programme in collaboration with teachers and families (Nutbrown, Hannon & Collier, 1996). All participants were in the first phase of the *Raising Early Achievement in Literacy Project* in Sheffield which aims to develop and evaluate ways of working with families to promote children's preschool literacy development. Video is the ideal medium to communicate our ideas and how they translate into practice but in this paper version of my presentation I will try to explain the essentials in text.

'ORIM' stands for 'Opportunities', 'Recognition', 'Interaction' and 'Model' - four things which families can provide for children's literacy development (and for that matter for any aspect of development). These are partly logical necessity; partly a reflection of widely accepted theoretical perspectives.

In the early years, parents can provide vital learning *opportunities*: by resourcing children's drawing or scribbling activities; by encouraging literacy-related socio-dramatic play; by alerting them to, and helping them interpret, environmental print; by engaging them in nursery rhymes which aid speech segmentation and phonological awareness; by sharing story books and other written materials; by having other printed matter such as books, encyclopaedias, newspapers and so on in the home; by creating space for literacy activities by rationing TV viewing; and by enabling children to use libraries and to participate in visits, trips or holidays which provide further literacy demands and opportunities.

Parents can provide unique encouragement for children in their *recognition* and valuing of children's early achievements in, for example, handling books, reading, understanding logos, and writing. Recognition is fundamentally about *seeing* what children can do but it extends to celebrating their achievement in ways which encourage them.

Family members need to *interact* with children - supporting, explaining, and challenging them to move on from what they know about literacy to do more. There are a number of theories we can draw on here. An important form of interaction is probably involving children in real literacy tasks in which they can make a meaningful contribution (e.g. adding their 'writing' to a greetings card, turning the pages of a book, selecting shopping items by brand name) thereby enabling them 'to do today with an adult what tomorrow they will be able to do independently'. But *interaction* can take many forms, including pointing out, direct instruction, demonstration, dialogue, games, and socio-dramatic play. It can be informal or structured according to some prescriptive method.

Finally family members act as powerful *models* if and when children see them using literacy, for example, in reading newspapers for information or enjoyment; writing notes or shopping lists; using print to find things out, to follow instructions; or to earn a living, for example, by doing paperwork at home; and generally demonstrating how written language is linked to a wide range of adult purposes in the home, community and workplace.

We find it helpful to conceptualise literacy experience in terms of *strands*. We do not claim any originality for this - it is an obvious way to try to make sense of complex development. What counts as a strand is a matter of convenience. For us, the main ones are *environmental print*, *book sharing*, *early writing*, and *oral language* but others could be distinguished. Strands can always be unpicked further into sub-strands. For example, important sub-strands of oral language include phonological awareness, storytelling, de-contextualised talk, vocabulary and talk about written language. The metaphor of strands is helpful in suggesting that these things are at the same time separable *and* intertwined.

* * * Figure 6 here * * *

For each strand of literacy, families have the potential to provide opportunities, recognition, interaction, and a model (Figure 6). Each cell in this framework refers to an aspect of family support for early literacy (e.g. providing a reading model, appropriate interaction in writing).

We need to see framework for what it is - simply a way of linking some helpful concepts. It is not in itself a theory of literacy development (despite, obviously, being informed by theories). It can help describe existing patterns of family literacy - in particular it helps in seeing what families do rather than what they supposedly 'fail' to do.

More important for us is its potential as a *map of intervention possibilities*. One can ask in relation to each cell in the framework, 'How could an early childhood program support the parent's role?'. This is not meant to be prescriptive - stipulating what families *ought to do*. Rather it is a matter of enlarging parents' conception of what they *could* do, thereby increasing their choices and awareness of what power they have.

This framework is a heuristic device for generating an intervention programme. It provides a convenient checklist for thinking through what might be done with parents in relation to any selected strand of literacy (or, for that matter, strands of other learning). Reviewing all the cells makes a full coverage of possibilities more likely. It is a precaution against blind spots.

* * * Figure 7 here * * *

To show how this can translate into practical action, consider Figure 7 which shows how ORIM can be applied to the strand of early writing. In a study of how this framework is used in practice we have found that teachers do find it of value (Hannon and Nutbrown, 1997). Of course it is just

one approach to thinking about families in early literacy education. I would be interested to hear how colleagues here think about their work with families.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Returning to the theme of this institute I hope that we can agree that 'balance' here means recognising and accepting the contribution of families to children's early literacy education and that 'continuity' means following strands of literacy from home to classroom. We can be reasonably confident that this will raise children's achievement although the extent of improvement is a matter for research which should accompany the future development of practice.

* * * Figure 8 here * * *

There is a final problem which I must address. You may say that 'this is all very well but do I really need to do all this with all the families at my school?' No, I do not thinks so. There needs to be some selectivity - not necessarily at the level of targeting individual families in a community (which raises a host of problems) but perhaps at the level of schools or communities where schools might offer a more extensive family involvement possibilities. Let us imagine schools and teachers working in *circles of involvement*.

In a chapter I have contributed to a forthcoming IRA book edited by Susan Neuman and Kathy Roskos I describe four concentric circles of involvement (Hannon, 1998). Moving from inner to outer they are: (1) Avoiding unnecessary parent exclusion of the kind described earlier in Figure 3; (2) Allowing home-to-school and school-to-home literacy cross-overs; (3) Developing home-focused programs for school-age children; and (4) Developing home-focused preschool programs. I argue that all schools should work in the first and second circles, most should work in the third, and some should work in the fourth circle. I invite you to consider which circle you are currently working in - and whether it is the right one for your situation.

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[Further references and literature review are provided in Hannon (1998) above]

Figure 1

SOME CHALLENGES FACED BY EARLY LITERACY EDUCATORS

1. Instability and change in school structures and funding
2. Pressure to raise literacy standards - driven by national anxieties
3. Curriculum change - often top down, at national or state level
4. Impact of information and communications technology
5. Persistent inequalities in children's access to the curriculum and achievement
6. Working with families, not just children.

Figure 2

THE CHALLENGE OF WORKING WITH FAMILIES

"There is a limit to what can be achieved in the classroom alone but, given that teachers cannot simply hand over all their responsibilities to parents, what are they to do?" (Hannon, 1998)

ONE RESPONSE TO THE CHALLENGE

Parental exclusion (not necessarily formal or explicit)

We need to find ways of working with families which

- are realistic about the priority schools can afford to give to this challenge amongst others
- strike a *balance* between school and family learning (recognising distinctiveness of each)
- maximise *continuity* family to school - building on the former, not 'overwriting' it
- result in children *achieving* more (and parents too in some situations)

Figure 3

SOME UNINTENDED WAYS OF EXCLUDING PARENTS

- Keep parents out of classrooms (e.g. on grounds that if they all came at once there would not be enough space).
- Rely exclusively on reading materials which parents cannot obtain themselves (e.g. special reading schemes).
- Never allow classroom books or other literacy materials home (e.g. on grounds that they would be lost or damaged).
- Show no interest in children's home literacy activities.
- Limit information about the school's literacy teaching (e.g. to one part of principal's talk to new parents).
- Always treat parents' estimations of their children's progress sceptically.
- In conversation with parents use unexplained technical terms (e.g. 'decoding', 'digraph', 'miscue', 'psycho-motor') whether or not they are strictly necessary.
- Gently dissuade parents from taking on a teaching role with their children (e.g. on grounds that they're over-anxious or pressuring).
- If parents help in school steer them away from direct participation in literacy activities (e.g. to washing paint pots, baking) and away from work with own children.
- Smokescreen the above with regular statements about the importance of parents in children's education.

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Figure 4

SOME KEY IDEAS

Insist on broad meaning of 'family literacy'

Expand the concept of teaching

Identify preferred focus of work with families - school or home learning?

Recognise differences between family literacy learning and classroom literacy learning

Use a conceptual framework to structure work with families

Address all strands of literacy

Figure 5

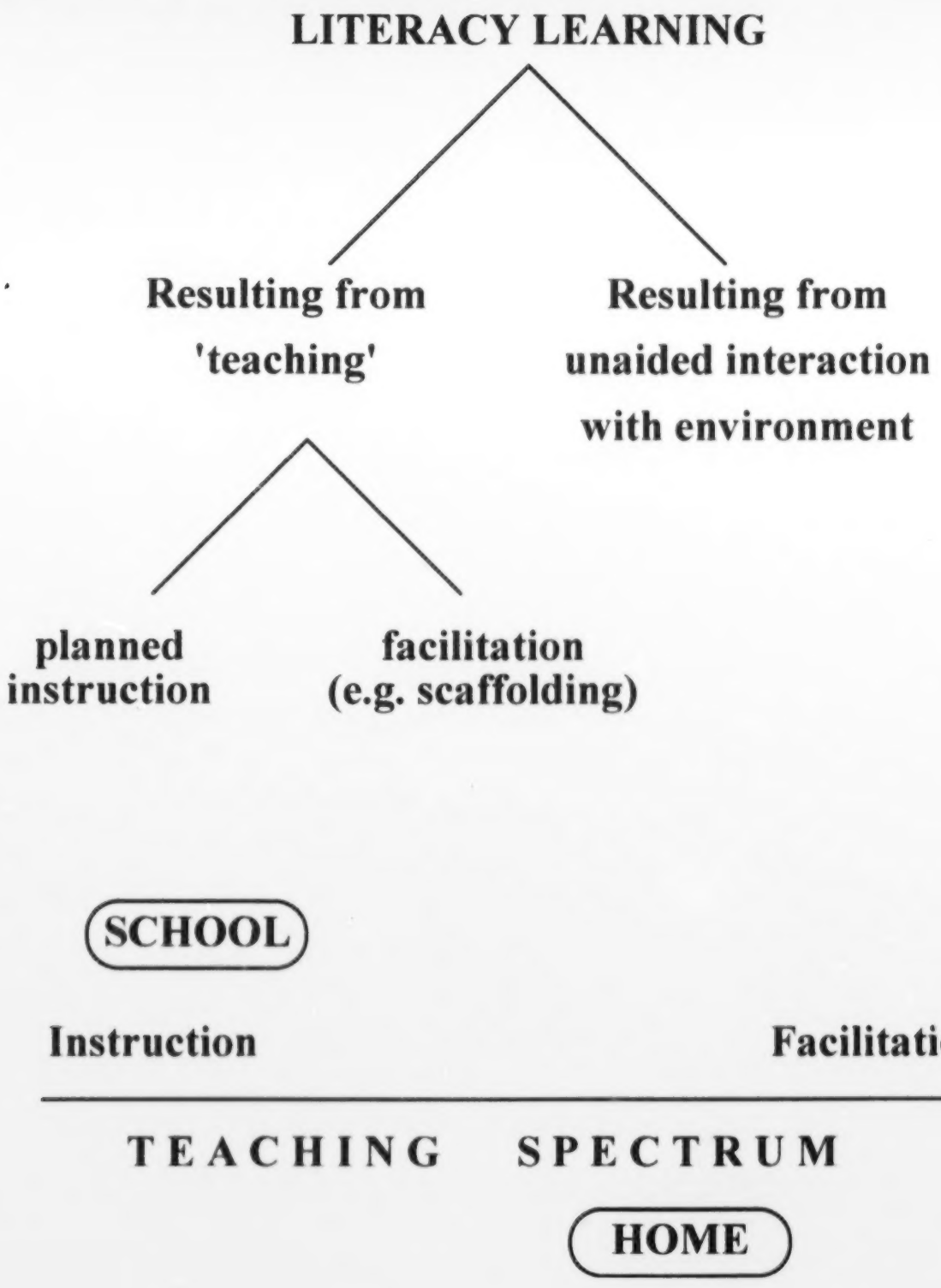
LITERACY LEARNING
Resulting from 'teaching'
Resulting from unaided interaction with environment
planned instruction
facilitation (e.g. scaffolding)
SCHOOL
Instruction
Facilitation
TEACHING SPECTRUM
HOME

Figure 6

THE *ORIM* FRAMEWORK

STRANDS OF EARLY LITERACY

EXPERIENCE

FAMILIES PROVIDE

	Environmental Print	*Book Sharing*	*Early Writing*	*Oral Language*
Opportunities				
Recognition				
Interaction				
Model				

Figure 7

APPLYING *ORIM* TO THE WRITING STRAND

How can we help parents provide more *opportunities*?

• Show photos of children writing at home • Suggest parents provide small space (temporary or permanent) where children can draw/write • Show possibilities of literacy-related socio-dramatic play • Point out writing possibilities with household materials (e.g. packaging, junk mail) • Provide starter packs of writing materials • Use home visits to introduce variety in materials (e.g. lined paper, forms) and implements (pencils, felt tips, chalk, paintbrushes) •

How can we enhance parents' *recognition* of early achievement?

• Show examples of how children's writing develops from earliest mark making to conventional script • Use OHP presentations and wall displays • Run workshops on writing development • Invite parents to sort examples of writing into possible developmental sequence • Encourage home scrapbook of children's writing to show changes over 1-2 year period • Refer to writing when chatting to parents about their child's activities during a preschool session • Use 'literacy jigsaw' to focus attention on writing achievements •

How can we support/extend parents' *interaction* with their children?

• Encourage parents to involve children in writing tasks (greeting cards, shopping lists, notes) • Invite parents to participate in 'shared writing' sessions in school/centre • Emphasise value of accepting early approximations • Emphasise importance of children understanding function, not just form • Give away the concept of 'scaffolding' •

Can we suggest how parents could provide a *model* of using written language?

• Use workshops, displays, everyday conversations, home visits and leaflets to emphasise that children learn about writing from watching writers write • Talk with parents about the influential models they provide in writing notes, greeting cards or shopping lists, filling in forms or doing domestic paperwork at home. • Use workshop to list other models that their children see (other adults, characters in books and TV, secretaries, servers, pre-school teachers) • Ask parents to note all the different models of writing their child might see in a week • Encourage parents to 'scribe' for children •

Figure 8

IDEAS INTO PRACTICE

Balance means recognising and accepting families' literacy too

Continuity means following strands of literacy from home to classroom

Increased *achievement* likely

CIRCLES OF FAMILY INVOLVEMENT

1. Avoiding unnecessary exclusion
2. Allowing home-to-school and school-to-home literacy cross-overs
3. Home-focused programmes for school age children
4. Home-focused programmes for children before school entry

Which circle are you working in?
Is it the right one for your situation?